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YELLOW PERIL AND TECHNO-ORIENTALISM IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare

Lok Siu and Claire Chun

ABSTRACT. The essay examines the rise of anti-Asian aggression within the converging vectors of the pandemic, the escalation of the U.S.-China trade war, and the growing concerns about cyber- and techno-security. By analyzing the techniques and effects of race-making in the current pandemic moment and connecting them to historical antecedents, we trace the persistence of the yellow peril ideology across different contexts. We argue that the yellow peril ideology, now configured within a techno-Orientalist imaginary where China is posited as the chief enemy-threat, is powerfully animating the racial logics and racial affect mediating the multiple terrains of public health, technology, and global trade.

Introduction

In the early weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, President Trump put out many mixed messages, but he remained consistent with one—that China was to blame for the spread of the virus. Repeatedly, he insisted on calling the novel coronavirus “the Chinese virus,” despite mounting public criticism against the racialization of the deadly pathogen. Many noted the inflammatory nature of this anti-Asian rhetoric. During this same period, reports ranging from verbal abuse to intimidation to physical assault against people of Asian descent documented the sudden rise of anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States and globally. According

to Human Rights Watch, an Asian woman in Brooklyn, New York, suffered a racially motivated acid attack, and in Texas, a Burmese American man and his two children were stabbed by a man who claimed he thought the family was “Chinese and infecting people with the coronavirus.”¹ The Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council in the United States reported over one thousand cases of anti-Asian incidents in a two-week period in March 2020.² Outside the United States, a Singaporean student in the United Kingdom was violently kicked and punched by an angry group of men after they uttered, “we don’t want *your* coronavirus in *our* country” (my emphasis).³ In Australia, a survey taken by the community group Asian Australian Alliance recorded a total of 178 reports of anti-Asian incidents in two weeks, ranging from racial slurs to physical assault.⁴ Though President Trump has dropped the “Chinese virus” for “kung flu” and tweeted on March 23 that “It is very important that we totally protect our Asian American community . . . the spreading of the virus is NOT their fault,” it seems that Sinophobia and racial violence against Asian Americans have been unleashed.

Make no mistake, as long as President Trump continues to take a confrontational stance, using the rhetoric of blame against China with the intention to punish it with new sanctions, tariffs, and even the cancellation of U.S. debt obligations,⁵ the racial aggressions against Asian Americans will continue to rise, if not intensify. By now, it is widely accepted that the novel coronavirus emerged first in Wuhan, and scientists believe that the zoonotic disease might have jumped from animals to humans at Wuhan’s Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, a wet market where vegetables, seafood, meat, and a small number of exotic wildlife were sold. Despite this, on April 30, President Trump casually offered a new theory, which Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted: that COVID had originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which houses a biosafety level-4 lab, and that the virus might have “leaked” from that lab. The implicit suggestion is that China had either intentionally bioengineered the novel coronavirus to cause massive destruction, thereby attributing malice, or carelessly leaked the virus due to scientific negligence, thereby attributing incompetence. In either case, these kinds of unsubstantiated speculations work to further stoke anger and disdain against the Chinese state. More disturbingly, they traffic in the idea of China as a biotechnology threat, resonating with pre-existing filmic representations of futuristic dystopian worlds.

The immediate and unqualified responses from the scientific community reveal the danger of these potentially incendiary speculations. Responding swiftly, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued a press release the morning of April 30 stating that “The Intelligence Community . . . concurs with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19

virus was *not manmade or genetically modified . . .*" (my emphasis).⁶ Within days, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, Dr. Anthony Fauci, attested that the virus "could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated."⁷ These assertions sought to extinguish any attribution of malice to the Chinese state. Even with firm contestation, however, the very invocation of the idea of biotechnology warfare has tapped into and perhaps even fueled our existing techno-Orientalist anxieties.

As the COVID pandemic story transpires in real time, engulfing the entire global community, taking unexpected twists and turns, making divergences and transgressions, we have become increasingly aware that the layers of entanglements cannot be easily parsed out, nor will we know anytime soon how and when the story will end. We offer a query into how we might assess and make sense of the intensifying Sinophobia and xenophobia in this current context. To do so, we must resist the temptation to confine our analysis to the narrow parameters of the pandemic. Rather, we insist on examining the rise of anti-Asian aggression within the concomitant vectors of the pandemic, the escalation of the U.S.-China trade war, and the growing concerns about cyber- and techno-security. Here we assert that the ideology of yellow peril set within a techno-Orientalist imaginary is powerfully animating the racial form and racial affect mediating the multiple terrains of public health, technology, global trade, and national security. While it is tempting to treat this historical conjuncture as extraordinary, it is crucial that we situate the current unfolding within the long history of Asian racialization, one that indexes the abiding tension between the political impetus to define national belonging and the shifting economic imperatives of the nation-state.⁸

In this essay, we examine the techniques and effects of race-making in this current moment, while linking them to historical antecedents, in order to illustrate the persistence of the yellow peril ideology as it is being configured through a techno-Orientalist imaginary where China is posited as the chief enemy-threat. What follows is an analysis of how Chinese alterity as national security threat is being simultaneously constructed and disciplined in the different but related arenas of the pandemic, science, and technology.

The Contemporary Racial Repertoire of the "China/Chinese" Threat

The outbreak of the pandemic could not have had worse timing (as if it could be timed), but timing is critically important here. Its emergence amid the ongoing intensive trade war between the United States and China is sig-

nificant in that the prevailing tensions between the two countries and the discourses of Chinese unfair trade competition, scientific espionage, and technological surveillance frame the reception of the pandemic. One may argue that President Trump's insistence on blaming China for the spread of the deadly virus is yet another tactic in his administration's sustained attempt to quell China's economic power at the same time that it provides a foil to distract from—and a scapegoat to blame for—the economic and public health crisis in which we find ourselves.

At this particular juncture, we unfortunately have been inundated with media coverage of a plethora of accusations and actions launched against China and Chinese Americans. Within the past two years, we have witnessed the implementation of trade sanctions and tariffs against China, the removal of prominent Chinese American scientists from research institutions, and the severing of nationwide economic transactions with certain China-based telecommunications corporations, with Huawei Technologies Company being the most notable. All these have been advanced in the name of national security. The discursive formation and the representational devices that have been used to justify these state directives play a critical role in constructing the People's Republic of China (PRC) as culprit and as America's enemy number one. These constructions, some of which will be examined in this essay, are layered upon one another, each building and elaborating on the last, and each invoking and simultaneously inciting a different set of anxieties that lie within the broader repertoire of China/Chinese as threat. Indeed, the inundation of media about China makes it difficult, if not impossible, to decipher truth from falsehood, myth from reality, rhetoric from evidence. Our task here is not to weigh the truth-value of these representations but to treat them as ongoing contests embedded in power and to draw out their material effects. It is worth noting that while the explicit target of U.S. state aggression has been the mainland Chinese state or the PRC, the actual effects are much more wide-ranging and extend into everyday aggressions against all those who present as East Asian American.

In our examination of the variegated representations of China/Chinese, we suggest that the longstanding ideology of "yellow peril" remains not just pertinent, but extremely forceful in constructing a multifaceted repertoire of Chinese state threat and, by extension, of Chinese/Asian American threat. What is particular about this recent iteration of yellow peril is its configuration through the lens of techno-Orientalism, a framework that is primarily used to examine the explicitly fictional genres of novels, videogames, and films but that we now assert as being actively deployed in this current historical conjuncture.

Yellow Peril and Techno-Orientalism

The term yellow peril emerged in the late nineteenth century in response to Japan's arrival to the geopolitical stage as a formidable military and industrial contender to the Western powers of Europe and the United States.⁹ The concept was further elaborated and given a tangible racial form through Sax Rohmer's series of novels and films that provided the early content for the social imaginary of "yellow peril" along with its personification in the character of Dr. Fu Manchu, the iconic supervillain archetype of the Asian "evil criminal genius," and his cast of minions.¹⁰ Strikingly, Dr. Fu Manchu's characterization as evil, criminal, and genius continues to inform the racial trope of the Asian scientist spy; and more recently, we may add to the list the bioengineer, the CFO, the international graduate student, to name just a few. Moreover, the notion of the non-differentiable "yellow" masses continues to function as a homogenizing and dehumanizing device of Asian racialization, which makes possible the transference of Sinophobia to Asian xenophobia.

In its inherent attempt to construct a racial other, "yellow peril" is more a projection of Western fear than a representation of an Asian object/subject, and in this sense, it may be better understood as a repository of racial affect that can animate a myriad of representational figures, images, and discourses, depending on context. Indeed, the images and discourses of yellow peril have surfaced multiple times throughout the twentieth century, capturing a multitude of ever-shifting perceived threats that range from the danger of military intrusion (i.e., Japanese Americans during WWII), economic competition (i.e., Chinese laborers in the late nineteenth century, Japan in the 1980s), Asian moral and cultural depravity (i.e., non-Christian heathens, Chinese prostitutes, opium smokers), to biological inferiority (i.e., effeminacy, disease carriers). As Colleen Lye observes, "the incipient 'yellow peril' refers to a particular combinatory kind of anticolonial [and anti-West] nationalism, in which the union of Japanese technological advance and Chinese numerical mass confronts Western civilization with a potentially unbeatable force."¹¹ Arguably, the yellow peril of today represents heightened Western anxieties around China's combined forces of population size, global economic growth, and rapid technological-scientific innovation—all of which emerge from a political system that is considered ideologically oppositional to ours. The current context, we suggest, is best understood through the lens of techno-Orientalism.

When the idea of techno-Orientalism first appeared in David Morley and Kevin Robins's analysis of why Japan occupied such a threatening position in Western imagination in the late 1980s, techno-Orientalism offered a

framework to make sense of the technologically imbued racist stereotypes of Japan/the Japanese that were emerging within the context of Western fears and anxieties around Japan's ascendancy as a technological global power. They proposed that if technological advancement has been crucial to Western civilizational progress, then Japan's technological superiority over the West also signals a critical challenge to Western hegemony, including its cultural authority to control representations of the West and its "others." They claimed that the shifting balance in global power—the West's loss of technological preeminence—has induced an identity crisis in the West. In response, techno-Orientalism, in which "[idioms of technology] become structured into the discourse of Orientalism," is produced in large part to discipline Japan and its rise to techno-economic power.¹² The United States, for instance, externalized its anxiety into xenophobic projections of Japan as a "culture that is cold, impersonal, and machine-like" in which its people are "sub-human" and "unfeeling aliens."¹³ Techno-Orientalism, born from the "Japan Panic," was effectively consolidated through and around political-economic concerns that frame Japanese and, by extension, Asian techno-capitalist progress as dangerous and dystopian.

Extending Edward Said's concept of Orientalism,¹⁴ techno-Orientalism marks a geo-historical shift where the West no longer has control over the terms that define the East—the "Orient"—as weak, inferior, and subordinate to the West. It marks a shift not only in political-economic power but also in cultural authority. Techno-Orientalism, then, is the expressive vehicle (cultural productions and visual representations) by which Western and Eastern nations articulate their fears, desires, and anxieties that are produced in their competitive struggle to gain technological hegemony through economic trade and scientific innovation.¹⁵

Analogous to Japan's position in the late 1980s, China currently figures into the techno-Orientalist imaginary as a powerful competitor in mass production, a global financial giant, and an aggressive investor in technological, infrastructural, and scientific developments. At the same time, the increasing purchasing power of China provokes American fear of a future global market that is economically driven by Chinese consumptive desires and practices. It is this duality—the domination of both production and consumption across different sectors of the techno-capitalist global economy—that undergirds American anxieties of a sinicized future.¹⁶

Further amplifying these anxieties around Chinese techno-economic domination is our imagination of China/the Chinese as the ultimate yellow peril, whose state ideology is oppositional to that of the United States and whose unmatched population size combined with its economic expansion and technological advancements may actually pose a real challenge to U.S.

global hegemony. We turn now to examine how the ideology of yellow peril is manifesting in the current context of techno-Orientalism, beginning first with an analysis of the racial trope of “Chinese as contagion” and its connection to anti-Asian aggression.

The Racialized Contagion

The recent exponential rise of anti-Asian violence in the United States and globally during the pandemic illustrates the persistent danger of racializing diseases. Historians and social critics have documented and traced the ways in which diseases have been continually racialized by their association with particular peoples in geographical regions. Examples in recent memory include SARS marked as Asian, MERS as Middle Eastern, Ebola as African, and so on. In regards to this current pandemic, it might be useful to recall the popularization of the “Chinese as contagion” trope in U.S. history, as its multiple afterlives continue to inform the public’s facile acceptance of the notion of Chinese as diseased bodies and pathogenic carriers. The late nineteenth century racialization of the smallpox outbreak in San Francisco serves as the antecedent to the current moment and illustrates its relationship to the broader context of the anti-Chinese movement.

When the smallpox epidemic broke out in San Francisco intermittently from 1868 through the 1880s, its origin was presumptively traced to Chinatown. At the time, it was widely accepted that epidemics were caused by environmental factors like polluted air, contaminated water, and general bad hygiene and sanitation. Through prevailing racist ideas of this period, Chinatown’s crowded streets, tight living quarters, and irregular layout were taken as evidence in creating a “laboratory of infection.”¹⁷ According to Nayan Shah, public health officials of the time helped construct Chinatown as a place filled with “horrors of percolating waste, teeming bodies, and a polluted atmosphere” and attributed these unsavory conditions to “depraved” innate Chinese cultural behaviors and practices, ignoring the economic factors that compel sharing of living quarters and the racist state in not extending sanitation services to Chinatown.¹⁸ By linking the environmental conditions of Chinatown with Chinese “primordial” culture, government officials came to target the Chinese person (the cultural-biological body) as the site of disease origin, contamination, and threat to public health writ large. Another study of public health in Los Angeles offers an analogous scenario.¹⁹

The emergence of these public health discourses in the 1870s must be situated in the context of the anti-Chinese movement. As Chinese workers

poured into cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles after the completion of the railroad, they quickly became targets of intensified prejudice and racial violence. To the white working class, these Chinese laborers were perceived not only as economic threats to their livelihood; but, as racialized discourses of Chinese as disease carriers intensified, they were also feared and despised as a biomedical threat. Together, these yellow peril discourses molded perceptions of ethnic Chinese as both economic and biological threats, fueling the anti-Chinese movement that eventually led to the successful legislation of the Chinese Exclusion Act. This historical example shows how the racialization of disease worked in tandem with racial capitalist logic to animate anti-Chinese sentiment, violence, and legislation.

The current rise in anti-Asian violence is clearly spurred by President Trump's persistent attacks against China along with his explicit racialization of the virus. Indeed, since the onset of the pandemic, his administration has sought to blame China, whether it is for hiding the seriousness of the outbreak in Wuhan, delaying communication of the outbreak, or under-reporting the number of deaths. The deployment of the politics of blame seeks to displace the pandemic-induced anger, anxiety, and rage onto China and, by extension, onto the bodies of Chinese and Asian Americans. Moreover, the racialized terms, the "Chinese virus" and the "kung flu," naturalizes the virus as being endemic to Chinese bodies, thereby conjuring the phantasm of the Chinese/Asian contagion. While the ideational power of the Chinese/Asian contagion lies in its construction of the Asian body as the vehicle and embodiment of the virus, the deployment of blame against China/the Chinese for the spread of the virus serves as the catalyst that directs anger and rage against Chinese/Asian bodies.

However, to view current attacks against Chinese/Asian Americans in the isolated context of the pandemic risks the danger of interpreting this aggression "as exception." Instead, drawing on the lessons of the late nineteenth century example, we want to situate the rise of anti-Asian violence within the broader context of the anti-China campaign.

The Scientist Spy: Espionage, Intellectual Theft, and the Commoditization of Science

Beginning with the escalation of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018, it seemed every new tariff imposed by the United States on China was reciprocated by a tariff placed on the United States. The mediated trade war, like an extended cockfight, makes for brilliant displays of male bravado at the same time that it inspires nativist white nationalism against China and

"the Chinese." This broad scale and highly publicized interstate trade war, we should note, is carried out alongside a relatively quieter but equally damaging domestic attack against Chinese American scientists in the United States.

The first half of 2019 witnessed a surprising amount of media coverage on the removal of top Chinese American scientists from research institutions in the United States. In January, epidemiologist Xifeng Wu resigned from MD Anderson Cancer Center after three months of intensive FBI investigations, which yielded no charges. She had worked there for twenty-six years and at the time served as the director of the Center for Public Health and Translational Genomics. The Center later decided to remove three other Chinese American scientists.²⁰ In May, Emory University fired two Chinese American neuroscientists, Li Xiao-Jiang and Li Shi-Shua, who had worked there for twenty-three years and were well-known for their groundbreaking research on developing animal models to study Huntington disease and other neurological conditions.²¹ The university charged the Lis with failure "to fully disclose foreign sources of research funding and the extent of their work for institutions and universities in China," charges that the Lis dispute.²² These investigations, led by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in coordination with (and in some cases prompted by) the FBI, were part of the effort that focused on China's Thousand Talents Plan (TTP), which recruits scientists to work at universities in China. It was the fear that China was using the TTP and other funding programs to acquire intellectual property via U.S.-based scientists that prompted these investigations. Since August 2018, the "NIH has investigated at least 180 scientists at more than 65 institutions . . . Most—but not all—are ethnic Chinese scientists."²³ According to Michael Lauer, NIH's head of extramural research, "82 percent of those being investigated are Asian [American]."²⁴

The disproportionate number of allegations against Asian American scientists across the United States has stoked fears that they are being singled out and racially profiled to be stigmatized, scrutinized, and punished. As it is, many Chinese American scientists have been removed from their tenured positions, often without due process or even an opportunity to respond to the allegations. Indeed, still fresh in memory is the case of Dr. Wen Ho Lee, the engineer who was working at the Los Alamos National Laboratory when he, then age sixty, was arrested in 1999. It mattered not that he was a U.S. citizen nor that he was Taiwanese American. Initially indicted and placed in solitary confinement for nine months, Lee eventually accepted a plea bargain from the federal government on one out of 59 counts when the government could not prove the case against him. He was awarded \$1.6 million in settlement.

This 1999 high profile case did not only call attention to the greater number of racial profiling cases against Chinese American scientists in the period that preceded Lee's arrest and that had remained largely invisible until then. It also helped crystallize in the popular imagination the racial trope of the Chinese "scientist-as-spy"—quite resonant of the "evil criminal genius" of the fictional character Dr. Fu Manchu—and made visible the targeted criminalization of this highly educated class of ethnic Chinese scientists and engineers. This trope and its consequential effects on racial profiling make explicit that educational-scientific achievement does not automatically translate into national acceptance or belonging. It exposes the falsehood of meritocracy that undergirds the American dream. Race and ethnicity—in this case, being ethnic Chinese/racially Asian—renders people suspect in all aspects of national security. As Andrew Kim, an attorney in Houston, asserts, "In the same way racial profiling African American as criminals may create the crime of 'driving while black,' profiling of Asian Americans as spies . . . may be creating a new crime: 'researching while Asian.'"²⁵

Emerging from the context of the U.S.-China trade war, the 2019 targeted crackdown of Chinese American scientists certainly can be perceived as part and parcel of the Trump administration's comprehensive plan to cripple China's global economic advance. These specific attacks against individual scientists aim to stamp out China's alleged practices in acquiring/extracting intellectual property—both scientific and technological—of U.S.-based researchers, the kind of intellectual property that could be commoditized and entered into the calculus of economic trade. Indeed, the fear of scientific espionage is fueled by the fear of loss of economic competition. In a global market driven by scientific-technological innovation, it is the potential loss of the commoditization of science and technology in the race for control of global market shares that drives this "witch hunt" for possible intellectual property theft and Chinese scientific espionage.

Yet, despite their joint efforts, the NIH and the FBI seem to share divergent opinions of what might be the cause of NIH rule infractions. The NIH has attributed the main source of the problem to the scientists' neglecting, willfully or not, to report their participation in China's TTP program, which recruits U.S.-based scientists with substantial funding. While participation in the TTP program is not prohibited, the reporting of both their participation and funding are required. In some cases, scientists are charged for the failure to recount all the names of their foreign research collaborators. Others set up businesses in China and neglect to report those sources of income. Few seem to rise to the level worthy of removal from university posts. In an e-mail message sent to the campus community, Massachusetts

Institute of Technology (MIT) President L. Rafael Reif stated, "Looking at cases across the nation, small numbers of researchers of Chinese background may indeed have acted in bad faith, but they are the exception and very far from the rule. Yet faculty members, post-docs, research staff and students tell me that, in their dealings with government agencies, they now feel unfairly scrutinized, stigmatized and on edge—because of their Chinese ethnicity alone."²⁶

Scientists of all backgrounds now feel uneasy about foreign research collaborations, pointing to the contradiction between the long-standing encouragement to engage in global collaborations and the recent criminalization of those same collaborations. Thus far, only five scientists have been removed from two research institutions. Meanwhile, at least several universities, including MIT, Yale, Stanford, and UC Berkeley, have issued statements addressing the corrosive effects that heightened scrutiny and stigmatization of Chinese American scientists have had on the research community.

The FBI, however, offers a much more dangerous theory. According to Bloomberg Business reporter Peter Waldman, FBI Director Christopher Wray, in an April speech given at the Council on Foreign Relations, "described the reason for the scrutiny of ethnic Chinese scientists. [Wray claims that] 'China has pioneered a societal approach to stealing innovation in any way it can from a wide array of businesses, universities, and organizations.' Everyone's in on it . . . China's intelligence services; its state-owned and what he called 'ostensibly' private enterprises; and the 130,000 Chinese graduate students and researchers who work and study in the US every year. 'Put simply, China seems determined to steal its way up the economic ladder at our expense.' . . . In Wray's retelling, China's challenge to the US today is unlike any this nation has faced. Whereas the Cold War was fought by armies and governments, the contest is being waged, on China's side, by the 'whole of society,' the FBI director said, and the US needs its own whole-of-society response. But what does that look like in a society with more than 5 million citizens of Chinese descent, many of whom work in the very science and technology fields said to be under assault?"²⁷

Wray's message suggests that anyone of Chinese descent is a potential spy working for China. Herein lies both the logic and justification for racial profiling, as ethnicity alone is evidence enough for the potentiality of guilt and wrongdoing. Yet, this logic is deeply flawed, given that the category of ethnic Chinese encompasses a wide diversity of people with a broad spectrum of ideological leanings. Certainly, ethnic Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong may not always agree with, if not directly oppose, Chinese state ideology. Moreover, the message also suggests any and all (non-Chinese)

Americans should stand ready to respond to this widespread “societal attack.” Undoubtedly, these comments have heightened anxiety and fear among Chinese/Asian American scientists and engineers. A retired federal employee, Nancy Chen, commented during a panel discussion on this new academic climate at the University of Chicago, “The great fear is that history may repeat itself in this political climate, and Chinese Americans may be rounded up like Japanese Americans during WWII . . . The fear and worry is real.”²⁸ The specter of Japanese American mass incarceration continues to haunt Asian Americans.

Indeed, the incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during WWII exemplifies the most wide-sweeping state-sanctioned response to yellow peril. War propaganda around the potential infiltration of Japanese military intelligence of the U.S. Pacific Coast incited popular fear and anger against people of Japanese descent in the United States. When President F. D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 to evacuate people of Japanese descent (citizenship notwithstanding) from the West Coast and to relocate them to concentration camps throughout the United States, an entire population of Japanese Americans—men, women, and children—became racially marked as potential enemies and threats to national security.²⁹ Extending this order beyond the U.S. nation-state, the Roosevelt administration lobbied its Canadian and Latin American neighbors to adopt a similar strategy, with the stated aim of establishing hemispheric security. All but a few Axis-leaning Latin American countries instituted their own form and degree of surveillance, incarceration, and deportation of Japanese “enemy aliens.”³⁰ Similarly, in this current context, the United States has been lobbying other nation-states to impose trade sanctions against China, end contracts, and hold China responsible for the pandemic.

Yellow peril creates enemies of entire racialized-national populations; it does not care to differentiate variations within this “enemy” population. The case of Japanese American incarceration makes clear that citizenship matters little when pitted against the formidable racializing discourses of the yellow peril, especially when national loyalty is presumed to align unquestionably with racial-ethnic descent. During WWII, the geopolitics involving the United States and Japan directly affected the treatment of ethnic Japanese in the United States, namely, the removal and incarceration of an ethnic population mobilized by racist fear and without any substantiated evidence of real threat or wrongdoing.

In this pandemic moment, the warnings of FBI Director Wray take on an ominous ring. This language of the “whole of society” attack by China powerfully invokes, once again, the image of yellow peril as an undifferentiated mass of Chinese threatening to overtake the West. This notion that

any Chinese—whether a student, a professor, an engineer, an executive, a neighbor, a U.S. citizen or not—can be a potential spy of the Chinese state resonates with the language that led to and eventually justified Japanese American incarceration. When aligned with the reference to “the Chinese virus,” we have an explosive image of the teeming, uncontrollable bodies (yellow peril) of Chinese/Asian contagion—in the forms of both a biological virus (coronavirus) and a societal virus (scientific espionage)—circulating and contaminating everything and everyone within its reach. Certainly, unlike Japanese Americans in WWII, the strategy of containment for potential Chinese scientific espionage has focused on relatively quiet, isolated, and individualized removals rather than massive relocation and incarceration. Such a strategy has hindered public visibility and undermined collective response. Could it be that Wray’s call for a “whole of society” response actually is already being carried out through these variegated forms of responses that range from highly coordinated institutional removals of Chinese American scientists to interstate policy stand-offs to dispersed, irregular outbursts of violence against Chinese/Asian Americans?

If the cases of Japanese American incarceration and the imprisonment of Dr. Wen Ho Lee offer any lessons, it is that ethnic Asians, perceived as perpetually foreign, are always subject to the rigged test of national loyalty. It matters not what factual evidence there is, if it exists at all. The machinations of the “yellow peril” rely on the perpetuated belief that ethnicity determines national loyalty and allegiance. Moreover, projected as an undifferentiated mass, Chinese/Asian Americans are represented as the servile minions that both embody and extend the anti-West and its efforts to dominate the “West.” Filtered through the U.S. racial lens, East Asian phenotype—no matter one’s ethnic background—is sufficient enough to provoke hate, anger, and violence. This was the fate of the aforementioned Burmese American family and the fate of Vincent Chin in the late 1980s, when he was beaten to death because his perpetrators had mistakenly assumed he was ethnic Japanese (Japan at that time was constructed as the main economic antagonist to the United States). No Asian American is safe from the current anti-China and Chinese/Asian American attacks. The enumerated cases of increasing violence experienced by Asians of all ethnic backgrounds attest to this reality.

Technological Behemoth: the Racial Capitalist Frontier of Techno-Economic Warfare

The American media coverage of Wuhan’s shutdown and the Chinese state’s deployment of surveillance technology to contain the virus through

contact tracing and quarantine enforcement measures offered the American public a preview of the PRC government at work. Enfolded in these stories are both the underlying admiration and fear around the Chinese state's efficiency and efficacy in using technology for population control. Similarly, the same kind of admiration and fear are evident in American perceptions of China's explosive economic development and global reach since the 1990s. And arguably, these same sentiments re-emerge when we read about the seemingly rapid success of Huawei Technologies, which has become the world's largest telecommunications technology company, overtaking Western companies that were once household names, like Eriksson, Nokia, and Motorola.

The exemplary case of Huawei brings our discussion of yellow peril into the explicit terrain of techno-Orientalism where the idea of the Chinese techno-virus—emerging at the nexus of technology, international trade, and cyber-security—is articulated through the racialized fear of Chinese technological domination achieved purportedly by stealing trade secrets, engaging unfair trade practices, and enabling Chinese state surveillance. What the case of Huawei illustrates is the extension of the “Chinese virus” trope that already exists in the domains of public health (as biological pathogen) and research institutions (scientist-spy) into the realm of everyday consumer technologies. Our point in discussing Huawei is not to defend it or to judge its activities. Rather, we want to call attention to the increasing significance of media/communications technologies as sites of interstate techno-economic-security struggles (in addition to already existing corporate surveillance). Toward that end, the Huawei example clearly shows the entwined issues and discourses of technology, international trade, and cybersecurity, all of which are filtered through and constitutive of the racializing techniques of the “Chinese virus.”

Between January 2019 and February 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice filed three indictments against Huawei and its subsidiaries. That Huawei is the first foreign company of recent memory that is singled out by the United States for charges related to sanctions violations, conspiracy to steal trade secrets from American companies (including source code and wireless technology manuals), and federal racketeering (including fraud, obstruction of justice, money laundering) is noteworthy in itself. This last charge of racketeering is used historically to address organized crime (i.e. mafias) and points to the U.S. government's intended juridical delegitimization of Huawei as an irrational institution mired in secrecy and an unlawful global corporation that cannot be trusted. In response to these allegations, Huawei accused the Department of Justice of exercising a form of political persecution and asserted that “[the charges] are based

largely on resolved civil disputes from the last twenty years that have been previously settled, litigated, and in some cases, rejected by federal judges and juries.³¹ The case will likely take years to resolve, but its function will become apparent by the ensuing interstate trade and diplomatic negotiations between China and the United States.

Meanwhile, the White House and various U.S. state departments have begun to exert pressure on both domestic institutions and allied nation-states to end contracts and research collaborations with Huawei. For instance, the U.S. Department of Commerce in 2019 blacklisted the firm on charges of intellectual property theft and barred U.S. companies from selling products to Huawei without federal authorization.³² Also, as discussed in the above section, the FBI has placed pressure on universities to increase oversight of Chinese American researchers and to divest from research collaborations funded by Huawei and other Chinese firms. Multiple universities, including MIT, Stanford University, and the University of Illinois, have terminated research partnerships with Huawei.³³

In addition to these domestic pressures, U.S. officials have asked allied nation-states to cancel any existing contracts with Huawei, especially ones that involve using the firm's equipment for developing 5G wireless networks. Cybersecurity serves as the stated rationale, conjuring the potential of the Chinese Communist Party through its ties to the firm to engage in cyber surveillance/espionage by intercepting individual, corporate, and government data flowing through the 5G wireless networks. According to this logic, the "Chinese/Asian contagion" manifest as "Chinese/Asian espionage" can now be hardwired into the infrastructural fabric of our telecommunications systems through which data will travel from our phones, computers, online accounts, and other kinds of technologies to Chinese companies and, potentially, the Chinese state. The assertion is that the use of Huawei's equipment will create massive security vulnerabilities not just to U.S. intelligence but also to American individuals whose personal information can be captured and used for endless possibilities of commoditization. It is also argued that Chinese technology integration into any Western cyber infrastructure project "would give China the upper hand in any potential cyber war."³⁴

Recently, this racialized fear of Chinese technology has materialized with intensified urgency in the privacy debates surrounding the immensely popular video-sharing platform, TikTok, and its Chinese parent company, ByteDance. With over 100 million users in the United States alone, TikTok has ascended to social media ubiquity, exacerbating American anxieties around China's technological dominance.³⁵ Rehearsing much of the same rhetoric used to condemn Huawei, U.S. lawmakers have argued that TikTok

poses a threat to the “national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States,” citing concerns over TikTok’s handling of user data and the company’s alleged allegiance to the Chinese government.³⁶ Indeed, in early August 2020, the Trump administration released an executive order that would effectively ban the social media app from the United States if ByteDance failed to address concerns regarding the app’s surveillance mechanisms, including the Chinese Communist Party’s “access to Americans’ personal and proprietary information . . .”³⁷ Worth noting is the fact that TikTok was the platform of choice used by K-pop fans to flood the Trump campaign with fake ticket reservations to the Tulsa, Oklahoma, rally. The spectacular embarrassment of a half-empty arena no doubt left an impression on the White House.

However, even as the U.S. government is accusing Chinese corporations like ByteDance and Huawei of colluding with the state, it too is expanding collaborations with U.S. technology companies. For instance, in 2019, Microsoft was awarded a \$10 billion contract from the Department of Defense to update and transform the U.S. military’s cloud computing infrastructure. The project, known as the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure (JEDI), is the Pentagon’s largest technology contract to date³⁸ and represents the growing relationship between the high-tech industry and the military. Ironically, these are the very same nationalistic ties that the U.S. government has accused TikTok of advancing.

The strategic framing of potential foreign violation of individual privacy is part and parcel of the racialized construction of the “Chinese/Asian techno-virus” as a danger to both American liberal personhood and national capitalist democracy. Indeed, the potentiality for China to gain the upper hand in any possible cyber and technological war with the United States compounds the economic threat that conglomerates like Huawei and ByteDance pose to U.S. global capitalism. The perceived dual dangers of compromised national security and economic competition—as embodied by Chinese transnational tech firms—positions Chinese technology, its commoditization, and its capture of the global market as evidence of China’s advance in “techno-economic warfare.” In this way, the specter of the Chinese/Asian threat is central, if not necessary, to legitimizing the insistence of American hegemony.

Conclusion

The unprecedented havoc caused by the coronavirus offers us an opportunity to pause and take note of both the deepening fractions within the

U.S. and the shifting dynamics between the national and the global. At the time of writing, on July 29, 2020, the virus has infected more than 17 million and has killed upwards of 667,000 people globally.³⁹ The disproportionate impact on U.S. communities of color—Black, Native American, Latinx, and Asian American—has revealed the deep historical and structural inequalities that have shaped the profoundly unjust outcomes. Meanwhile, the racialization of the coronavirus as a “Chinese virus” has given rise to anti-Asian aggression globally. While this pandemic moment compels us to critically interrogate the construction of the contagion, our goal is not to focus solely on the racialization of the pathogen but to situate this particular discourse of the Chinese/Asian viral threat within the broader context of the U.S.-China trade war.

The essay has examined how the ideology of yellow peril has been playing out in current techno-Orientalist discourses of disease, scientific espionage, and cybersecurity. Although this multivalent Chinese/Asian viral threat is the most recent iteration of yellow peril, it emerges from and is made possible by an already existing repertoire of racial tropes that are now coalescing to forge the consolidated phantasm of the Chinese contagion, spy, and technological behemoth as national security threat. All along, our goal has been to illuminate the intensive and enduring ideological work that undergirds the shifting political-economic agenda of U.S. racial capitalism.

We conclude this essay by returning to the ever-unfolding scenario of this techno-Orientalist moment. The recent legislations restricting entry of certain international graduate students to the United States and prohibiting U.S. residency to all international students whose curriculum is fully based on remote learning reflect not only the continuation but also the extension of the anti-China campaign into immigration policies. Reminiscent of the late nineteenth century anti-Chinese era, we are witnessing a similar consolidation of racial tropes that have constructed Chinese bodies as presenting multiple forms of threat. Yet, unlike the previous era, such policies are targeting the educated elite rather than the working class. The effects, however, have been similar in instilling fear and anxiety, though of different kinds, among both Chinese and non-Chinese Americans alike. As we enter into the uncharted territory of this next phase of the U.S.-China face-off, what will be the position of Chinese/Asian Americans in this national and global order? If crisis moments offer an opportunity to reimagine, transform, and rebuild, what kind of future do we want when we emerge from this current “crisis”?

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